

Education Success Starts with Family Involvement. Why Aren't Donors Funding It?

Addressing post-pandemic learning loss should include far greater support for programs that involve parents and caregivers in their kids' educations

By Ambika Kapur and Stephanie Sharp January 4, 2024

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Nehemiah Watkins, 4, sneaks a peek at the parent-teacher home visit between his parents, Jerome Watkins and Nicole Jones-Watkins, left, as they discuss the upcoming school year expectations for their son Xavier Ferrell, 9, middle, with Stanton Elementary teachers Samantha Antunez, middle right, and Melissa Bryant. The Washington, D.C., school system incorporated teachers visiting students' homes to build more positive relationships. (Credit: Amanda Voisard/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

Nearly four years after the pandemic shuttered classrooms, education donors have struggled with how best to address ongoing learning loss, especially for students living in marginalized communities. Why then do so few grantmakers support one of most effective and common-sense

solutions available — helping families play a consistent role in their kids’ educations?

Children perform better in school when their families take an interest in their education, talk to their teachers, and advocate for their needs. But such involvement is often a challenge for parents and caregivers juggling multiple jobs and contending with language and cultural barriers.

Helping schools and families overcome those barriers is a critical piece of the pandemic learning-loss puzzle. Without family involvement, many other education programs that grantmakers support will have little chance of success.

Unfortunately, most donors have yet to embrace that message. A recent report from Grantmakers for Education found that while 60 percent of education funders in 2023 supported efforts to help families become more involved in their kids’ education, that seemingly impressive number accounts for just eight percent of overall education funding.

Donor hesitancy to fund what are commonly called “family engagement programs” has stemmed in part from a lack of strong data on their effectiveness. But several recent studies have filled that research gap and make a strong case for why these programs work. Many grantmakers also assume that individual teacher-student relationships and homegrown solutions account for most successful efforts to involve families, fueling the notion that they are difficult to reproduce in multiple school districts.

Such thinking, however, shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what involving families in schools entails.



Tutoring doesn’t work if families don’t recognize their children need it. Introducing a new evidence-based math curriculum won’t achieve the intended results if families don’t know about it and don’t understand how

to help their kids at home. And offering summer programs and an extended school year won't help children who are behind if families don't sign them up.

Helping a parent or caregiver play a role in their child's education is not something that only the best teachers can do because they instinctively know how. It is a series of activities and actions, such as home visits, literacy programs, and teacher-parent communication tools, that administrators invest in, and educators buy into, year-round. Together, they ensure the entire school culture is committed to viewing families and caregivers as meaningful partners in their children's educational success.

If done right, the payoffs can be enormous.

A recent study conducted by Learning Heroes and TNTP (formerly the New Teacher Project) found that schools with higher scores on engaging families before the pandemic saw a 39 percent smaller increase in chronic absenteeism and a 25 percent lower decline in student attendance than schools with minimal family involvement practices. These schools also performed better on student achievement, including a 27 percent lower decline in English language arts and a 37 lower decline in math. And the findings held up for every type of school — rural and urban; elementary, middle, and high; low- and high-income.

Consider the experiences of educators such as Angelia Brye-Jones. The fifth-grade teacher in Sacramento, California, starts each school year by scheduling a 30- to 40-minute conversation with all her students' parents and caregivers. She meets with them wherever it's most convenient — at home, the local park, a church — and uses the time to discuss hopes, dreams, and goals for their children.

Byre-Jones learned how to effectively involve families through a professional development program provided by Parent Teacher Home Visits, which trains teachers to develop meaningful relationships with their students' families through voluntary home visits. The nonprofit, which is supported by the foundations where we work — the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Overdeck Family Foundation — reaches 60,000 teachers a year at an approximate cost of \$200 per teacher. Early independent research suggests that these home visits reduce the chances of chronic absenteeism by 21 percent.

For Byre-Jones, the early conversations with families help build strong connections for the year and send a signal that supporting their children is a shared goal that requires their ongoing support and involvement.

The Case for Philanthropic Investment

The best family engagement programs are both cost-effective and adaptable to nearly any school. Developing strong bonds with families follows a clear formula: targeted professional development, regular two-way communication, and the mutual setting of goals.

Collectively, our foundations have invested \$50 million in family engagement programs during the last five years. In that time, we've seen how evidence-based approaches that are discrete, simple, and increasingly less costly due to technology innovations improve outcomes for children.

For example, the family literacy program Springboard Collaborative coaches teachers and caregivers to work together to help students practice reading skills at home. On average, enrolled students achieve almost five months of reading growth during one five-to-10-week program.

A recent third-party analysis of Springboard, which reaches 30,000 children annually at a cost of approximately \$1,000 per student, found that participating in a single five-to-10-week program can increase a child's lifetime earnings by approximately \$10,000 to \$20,000 — or potentially 20 times the original investment.

Similar successes were seen for TalkingPoints, an artificial intelligence platform that connects teachers and caregivers and allows educators to communicate with families in more than 150 languages. The tool, which reaches more than four million students annually at a cost of approximately \$4 a student, was found to improve state-standardized math scores by nine points. One recent study found that scores on state math exams predicted high school graduation, adult income, and incarceration rates.

Without family involvement, many recent philanthropic investments, especially those focused on closing pandemic-induced learning gaps, will fail to meet their potential. Tutoring doesn't work if families don't recognize their children need it. Introducing a new evidence-based math curriculum

won't achieve the intended results if families don't know about it and don't understand how to help their kids at home. And offering summer programs and an extended school year won't help children who are behind if families don't sign them up.

Parents and caregivers want to help their children succeed. We just need to give them the tools to make sure that happens.

This article was originally published in the Chronicle of Philanthropy and is authored by Ambika Kapur, program director for public understanding at Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Stephanie Sharp, portfolio manager for early impact at Overdeck Family Foundation.